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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to identify the components of an assessment model that are applicable to the new institutions in higher education that are identifying themselves as being innovative or nontraditional. The emphasis is on the new institutions for several reasons. First, the new institutions are under greater pressure to justify their existence and their different ways of doing things than are more established institutions; second, one of the characteristics of most new institutions is a commitment to evaluate and assess; third, while there is a general similarity among the new institutions, as a group they are quite different from traditional institutions and traditional means of evaluation often do not apply. The components of the assessment model through which nontraditional institutions are to be evaluated come under the five general headings accessibility, flexibility, personalization, synthesis, and efficacy of resources. (Author/HS)

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# Evaluating Nontraditional Higher Education

## A NEW PERSPECTIVE

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# Evaluating Nontraditional Higher Education--
# A NEW PERSPECTIVE

The words "innovative" and "nontraditional" are being bandied about lately in much the same manner as accountability and relevance were not so long ago.

A rather cursory reading of the literature of higher education and even of many newspapers and magazines, provides ample evidence that a great number of colleges and universities are scrambling to be labeled as "innovative" or "nontraditional." Indeed, Krebs[1] has identified 75 institutions which label themselves as "nontraditional," and several new institutions have opened with the "nontraditional" label attached at the outset.

Recently, representatives from five of these new "innovative" and "nontraditional" institutions met at a conference jointly sponsored by Governors State University and Educational Testing Service. The Workshop on the Assessment of Nontraditional Higher Education[2] was organized to consider ways of assessing the "differences" that nontraditional approaches make upon both the educational processes and the students. The general questions considered by the participants were: "Do the 'differences' make a difference?" And if they do, "How are those differences assessed?" This paper reflects concerns expressed by the conference participants.

American higher education is certainly not without its critics. Not only are criticisms made, but a number of reports from rather prestigious organizations and foundations have suggested ways in which higher education should "put its house in order." Most of the recommendations made by these "critical friends" are considered to be innovative and, indeed, institutions

consider themselves to be innovative to the extent to which they adopt proposals recommended in these studies and reports. Although the reports from the "critics" are not identical, they are amazingly similar in what they recommend. And while not all schools have adopted innovative practices simply because they were recommended by prestigious study groups, it is again interesting that almost all of the "innovations" have been recommended in one or more of the various reports. It has been suggested that there is already developing a "tradition of nontraditional higher education."

However, the point is not simply that many institutions are implementing the recommendations made by prestigious educational study groups. The justification for any of these innovations should not be that "Carnegie recommended it." Rather, the justification for all that is done in the name of innovation should be that the changes and innovations make good educational sense—logically and empirically. It is certainly legitimate to ask what evidence justifies doing things "differently?"

The objective of this paper is to identify the components of an assessment model that are applicable to the new institutions. The emphasis is on the "new" institutions for several reasons. First, the new institutions are under greater pressure to justify their existence and their "different" ways of doing things than are more established institutions; second, one of the characteristics of most "new" institutions is a commitment to evaluate and assess; third, while there is a general similarity among the new institutions, as a group they are quite different from traditional institutions and traditional means of evaluation often do not apply.

Components of an Assessment Model

Whether or not a universally useful model will be developed remains to be seen, but a number of significant problem areas exist which must be considered. These problem areas can be conveniently classified under five general headings: Accessibility, Flexibility, Personalization, Synthesis, and Efficacy of Resources.

Accessibility

Are we providing education for those segments of society who normally or formerly did not attend college or who were not satisfied in previous educational experiences? Are those who are usually considered educationally disenfranchised (i.e., minorities, low income, older, married, and those with diversified work and life patterns) attending the new institution? What is the retention rate for these groups?

Most of the new and innovative institutions were created, in part at least, to answer criticisms such as the following from the Newman Report:[3]

> By long tradition, American colleges and universities discriminate against those who are older than "normal student age" and those whose established life and work patterns make returning to campus difficult if not impossible.

The answers to the problems of "educational apartheid," "the need for continuing access," and "barriers to entry and re-entry" were to be seen in the new, nontraditional institutions. As these institutions were created to meet the needs of the "noncollege-age population," they must be evaluated in terms of serving the needs of this market. Some early evidence suggests that innovative institutions are only providing another alternative to the normal college population, and at the same time are not meeting the needs of

the students for which they were created. Consequently, a factor in an evaluation model for nontraditional colleges must be an examination and analysis of the extent to which they are serving the needs of the particular segment of the population for which they were created.

Flexibility

Are we providing educational experiences that are flexible in terms of time, content and process? Are entrance requirements and admission procedures designed to be flexible, thus allowing the educationally disenfranchised to enter the programs? Are there flexible attendance procedures--Ingress and Egress flexibility? Is there flexibility provided for designing individual programs related to the individual's educational goals? Are there flexible learning delivery systems?

Jencks and Riesman, in The Academic Revolution, chronicle in explicit detail the evolution from academic diversity to academic sameness. Colleges and universities, whether or not equipped with resources and competent faculty, attempt to ape either the research university model or the liberal arts college model. Though success is not frequent, it is the rare institution that does not attempt to recruit both students of "high academic promise" and faculty who emulate the models of the graduate school professor. That most institutions are not successful in their attempts is not really the point. That so many institutions of higher education share the same goals is but one general indicator of the lack of diversity.

The Newman Report[4] pointed out quite correctly that: "Nearly all 2500 institutions have adopted the same mode of teaching and learning. Nearly all strive to perform the same generalized educational mission. The traditional

sources of differentiation--between public and private, large and small, secular and sectarian, male and female--are disappearing. Even the differences in character of individual institutions are fading."

It seems important, therefore, that one component of an assessment model for nontraditional institutions be concerned with the extent to which they provide alternatives to the general patterns.

Personalization

Are the educational programs, procedures and environment humane? Do the advisement procedures provide for close humane and personal interactions? Are the educational experiences individually satisfying? Are goals individualized and is self-determination of programs to meet these goals evident?

Any number of critics of higher education emphasize the lack of "personalization" as a contributing cause of student dissatisfaction. It is axiomatic that the new colleges must be more responsive to needs of individual students. In 1970, the Special Committee on Campus Tensions[5] identified a number of areas that were "troubling the students." Most prominent among these were the indifference and neglect, which students perceived within the institution.

The growing dissatisfaction with the "multiversity" and its accompanying lack of personal attention paved the way for the nontraditional post-secondary institutions. Additionally, a more diverse student body with a wider range of expectations of higher education makes the challenge for "personalization" more pressing.

The new type of student with diverse backgrounds and goals requires a new type of educational program with diverse options and objectives. Consequently, one component of an evaluation model for the nontraditional institutions must come to grips with the problem of "personalization" and "individualization." Evidence must be presented to show that opportunities for development of personalized programs goes beyond college catalogue rhetoric.

Synthesis

Are we providing a system that facilitates a synthesis of related educational and life experiences with the individuals' goals? For what prior experiences should credit be given? Formal education? Work? Life? What does the student really know? Has the student acquired the skills necessary to succeed in life?

What is a college degree? Some cynics maintain that it only indicates "time served." Certainly there is no single standard, other than "time served" or "units achieved," which allows one to identify the product. The range of knowledge and abilities among degree holders is tremendous, and who would deny that many high school sophomores can outperform many college students in things academic.

If the degree represents "things learned," then should not credit be given for learning regardless of the source of the knowledge? An agreement with the past statement introduces operational questions of tremendous import and complexity. Granted that knowledge should be recognized and rewarded, how does one design the criteria for assessing the knowledge and then rewarding with the proper amount of credit? How, for

example, does one equate 18 years of experience in the ghetto to sociology or psychology "credit" for what has been learned?

The competency-based or contract curricula offered by a number of the nontraditional institutions accentuates even more the pressure to recognize actual knowledge and abilities. If "credit" for experience/knowledge is granted, then the criteria for awarding the credit must be scrutinized very carefully. If experiential "credit" is equal to or superior to "academic credit," then this must be shown empirically. Likewise, the new institutions must be willing to admit, if necessary, that the assessment of prior experience is too difficult, too costly, or harmful (for whatever reasons) to the educational enterprise.

Efficacy of Resources

Are we effectively identifying and utilizing resources for accomplishing our mission and achieving our goals? Can we provide the same quality education for less money? Less time?

While there is little disagreement concerning the fact that higher education is facing a financial crisis, there is considerable disagreement over the approaches to meeting this crisis. Traditionally, university administrators have turned mainly to the receipt of additional funds as the solution to these problems. And traditionally they have received these additional funds.

Recently, however, relevant publics are demanding more efficient allocation of currently available resources to meet this crisis. "More Efficient Use of Resources" is the theme of numerous reports demanding reform in higher education. In the Report on Higher Education,[5] Frank Newman devoted

an entire chapter to what he termed "The Illegitimacy of Lost Effectiveness." The concluding page of that report is representative of much of the current literature:

> We have found that institutions under financial pressure often respond only by cutting expenditures in the easiest ways, rather than by making choices according to the relative merits of academic programs or the most cost-effective approaches to teaching.
>
> It is apparent that with multimillion dollar budgets and a growing questioning by the public, higher education can no longer afford the luxury of avoiding consideration of how effectively it uses its resources. How can skill in resource utilization become a factor in the system of academic rewards? The challenging intellectual task of finding more effective learning patterns by better utilization of resources must become a legitimate campus concern.

Thus, one component of an evaluation model for the nontraditional institutions must provide information on the extent to which they are efficiently utilizing resources, reducing waste, and eliminating obsolete practices.

Some General Considerations

In dealing with the factors noted above, it becomes evident that the traditional efforts and models are not satisfactory for the task. Dressel[7] has done an adequate job of pointing out problems involved in evaluating innovation in his monograph The New Colleges. The preface to his collection of articles on evaluative efforts at new colleges offers the following indictment:

> In a sense, these new colleges are unfair to the students who enter them. Other than some vague description of requirements and of experiences, the student has no adequate

> basis for choice of the program, and neither the student nor the faculty has any conception of what benefits in the way of cognitive and affective growth of significance in later life will emerge from the experience.

Notwithstanding the fact that most traditional institutions are subject to the same indictment, the burden of proof is upon the "new" colleges. The problem is that what has been considered acceptable in terms of evaluating traditional higher education in the past, is not applicable or acceptable for evaluation of nontraditional higher education in the present. It is critical that researchers develop nontraditional techniques, instruments and methodologies to evaluate nontraditional institutions.

One promising technique might involve consequences of a nontraditional education as well as looking at achievement of objectives. In an essay entitled "Thoughts on Evaluation of Higher Education," Pace said, "The first requirement for a new model of evaluation is to begin with the question, 'What are the consequences?'"[8] This proposition is supported by the idea that all programs have multiple consequences, many of which are not objectives or intentions of the programs. Applying this concept to evaluation of new colleges implies asking questions and gathering data which go beyond determining the extent to which objectives have been attained--we must consider consequences as well as objectives.

In developing and implementing a model such as suggested here, one must be aware that the extent to which colleges and universities have caused an "impact" on their students remains to be demonstrated. Feldman and Neucomb's comprehensive study on the question of impact[9] leads one to the compromising conclusion that the impact upon students is largely a function of student and environmental characteristics that cannot be attributed

directly to the college experience. This conclusion raises questions concerning the wisdom of even attempting to measure the impact of the new colleges.

Feldman and Neucomb's rather negative finding is further supported in the following statement from the recent study by Christopher Jencks and Associates[10]:

> Findings have convinced us that the long-term effects of schooling are relatively uniform. The day-to-day internal life of the schools, in contrast, is highly variable. It follows that the primary basis for evaluating a school should be whether the students and teachers find it a satisfying place to be.

In light of these findings, it seems that a new evaluation model might consider "satisfaction" or "expectancy" indices as one evaluative criterion. This would imply that data collection and analyses would be a means toward determining the degree to which members of the various university publics are satisfied with the "innovative" institution and/or the extent to which it has met their expectations. Even if all else fails, a model that considers the establishment of criteria of "satisfaction" or "expectancy" would have some basis for measuring the "impact" of the new institution.

In any event, the "honeymoon" for the new institutions will soon be over. If new evaluative criteria and techniques are not developed and refined, judgment will be made according to the traditional criteria. Regardless of whether the innovations flourish or die on this basis remains to be seen. One thing will be certain, however, and that is--they were not properly evaluated.

It seems the final decision regarding the "impact" of higher education remains a moot point. But one thing does remain clear. The "new" institutions do have different goals and it is not totally appropriate that they be evaluated in terms of criteria designed for institutions with other goals.

## FOOTNOTES

[1]Robert Krebs, "A Look at the Organizational Structure of Nontraditional Colleges and Universities and Their Research Functions," Paper presented at the 1972 Annual Meeting of the Society of Research Administrators, Seattle, Washington

[2]Participating institutions in the "Workshop on Evaluation of Nontraditional Higher Education" held at Governors State University, September 18-20, 1972 were: Empire State College, Saratoga Springs, N. Y.; Evergreen State College, Olympia, Washington; Florida International University, Miami, Florida; Governors State University, Park Forest South, Illinois; Minnesota Metropolitan State College, St. Paul, Minnesota

[3]Report on Higher Education. Task Force on Higher Education for the Office of Education, Frank Newman, Chairman

[4]Ibid., p. 12

[5]Campus Tensions: Analysis and Recommendations, Sol M. Linowitz, Washington, D. C.: American Council on Education, 1970, p. 19

[6]Report on Higher Education, p. 86

[7]The New Colleges: Toward an Appraisal, Paul L. Dressel, ed., Iowa City: American College Testing Program and the American Association of Higher Education, 1971

[8]C. Robert Pace, Thoughts on Evaluation in Higher Education, Iowa City: American College Testing Program, 1972

[9]Kenneth Feldman and Theodore Neucomb. The Impact of College on Students. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc. 1970

[10]Christopher Jencks, etal. Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America, New York: Basic Books, 1972